

# THE “ELISA MARTÍNEZ” STREET BRIGADE FOR SUPPORT TO WOMEN



Autonomía económica para las mujeres

Mexico City, 2018



## Brigada Callejera in Mexico

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(Marta Lamas)

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# THE “ELISA MARTÍNEZ” STRETT BRIGADE FOR SUPPORT TO WOMEN

<http://brigadaac.mayfirst.org/english>

**WHY BRIGADE?** Because we work in promotion, training or lobbying, in small operative groups.

**WHY STREET?** Because we make contact with our target population in the street.

**WHY FOR SUPPORT?** Because we are in solidarity with people and groups who live discriminatory situations.

**WHY TO WOMEN?** Because the active accompaniment we carry out is directed to women, preferentially.

**WHY ELISA MARTÍNEZ?** Because with her name, we give faithful testimony to her memory, and give recognition to sex workers who have died of AIDS, been assassinated or have suffered all kinds of discrimination because of being women, working in sex and having been infected with HIV.

**WHAT IS HER DREAM?** A new society where women are no longer seen as commercial objects.

**TO WHAT DOES HER EXAMPLE GIVE TESTIMONY?** Our commitment to combat all kinds of discrimination and violence towards women and those who are different.

**WHAT DO YOU AIM TO DENOUNCE?** Social structures that give preference to personal profit, selfishness and intolerance, that condemn millions of people to a life of misery, social exclusion and despair, and that reproduce the option of commercial sex as the only survival strategy, and homophobia as a mechanism to control human sexuality: thus institutionalizing two forms of violence against women and transvestites.

**WHAT VALUES MOTIVATE YOU?** We are motivated by Faith in the greatness of women and transvestites linked to the commercial sex trade: in their faces are reflected the beauty of creation, their great hearts and their desire to triumph in the face of adversity.

We are accompanied by Hope, that certainty that we can change the current situation of sexual exploitation and homophobia, and to open a horizon of possibilities such as free choice in sex, non-violence towards women and the different, and a free and voluntary maternity.

We are inspired by Charity, that habit of giving voice to those who have been denied it, to harbor pilgrims, to give refuge to the persecuted, to heal the sick, to satisfy those facing hunger and thirst, to understand those who are not like us, and not to judge those who work in the commercial sex trade.

We are motivated by Solidarity, by struggling together with the most unprotected, to obtain what is theirs and what they need to live a dignified life; what is theirs just because they are people.

We are illuminated by Love for those who live inhuman situations, like having to sell their own body in order not to die of hunger, and to survive in a society that condemns, denies and at the same time reproduces the offer of commercial sex.

We are mobilized by a search for Justice: full respect for people's rights, regardless of their social condition.

**WHAT IS THE BASIS OF YOUR PROGRAM OF ATTENTION?** In the promotion of community development activities, where women's participation, in conditions equal to men, ensures a greater social impact in the struggle against poverty, HIV/AIDS and the causes that generate the supply of commercial sex.

**WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY COMMUNITY PROMOTION?** By the promotion of community development, we mean a set of actions that permit the development of abilities and skills, so that each person, family, group and community accompanied can rely on themselves and can improve their living conditions.

**DO YOU CONSIDER HIV/AIDS TO BE A HEALTH PROBLEM?** We consider HIV/AIDS to be a problem of development, not of health. Based on this, since 1995 we have implemented integrated measures to prevent it. We believe that this will result in a greater social impact of actions carried out.

**WHAT PUBLICATIONS HAVE YOU PRODUCED?**

1. "THE IRRESISTIBLE ENCHANTMENT OF THE CONDOM – A Practical Guide for Social Marketing among Sex Workers, their partners and clients". Edited by COESIDA Jalisco.
2. "THE PREVENTION OF HIV/AIDS AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM AMONG SEX WORKERS. An educational model for health promoters". Edited by Brigada Callejera.

3. "THE NEW ALTERNATIVE FOR WOMEN. A practical guide for the promotion of the female condom among sexual workers, housewives and young women". Edited with the support COESIDA Jalisco, the Levi Strauss Foundation, Semillas and Social Co-investment funds from the 2001 Mexico City SEDESOL grants.
4. "THE AWAKENING OF DESIRE IN TIMES OF AIDS: Alternatives for the exercise of sexuality among youth, based on their values". Printed with the support of the Levi Strauss Foundation and COESIDA, Jalisco.
5. "INFORMATIONAL FOLDER FROM THE TASK FORCE ON THE PREVENTION OF HIV/AIDS IN CONTEXTS OF COMMERCIAL SEX". Edited with CENSIDA resources.
6. "MANUAL OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FOR INDIGENOUS MAYAN WOMEN FROM NORTHERN CHIAPAS". Edited with resources from the Center for Ecumenical Studies, El Encanto del Condon condom shops and Brigada Callejera.

**WHERE CAN WE BE FOUND?** La Merced Center of Attention: Calle Corregidora 115, Apt. 204, Col. Centro, Venustiano Carranza, C.P. 15100 Mexico City. Two blocks from the Metro Candelaria station, on Line 1. Tel-fax: 5542-7835.

E-mail: [brigadaac@laneta.apc.org](mailto:brigadaac@laneta.apc.org) [brigada.callejera@gmail.com](mailto:brigada.callejera@gmail.com)

Blog: <http://brigadaac.mayfirst.org>

<https://es-la.facebook.com/brigadacallejera/>

Twitter: @brigadaelisa

Skype: brigada.callejera

News stories about "Street Brigade Support Women Elisa Martínez" in English.





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REGIONAL REPORT: “TOWARDS GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY – PARTICIPATORY MONITORING OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING INITIATIVES”**

The project of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), “Towards greater accountability - Participatory Monitoring of Anti-Trafficking Initiatives”, aims to reaffirm the right of surviving victims to express their voices, by monitoring initiatives that are intended to benefit them.

The research study aimed to identify victims’ perceptions and views of the support services they received, which would be reflected in the respective country reports. The participant organisations in the research had provided some form of assistance to surviving victims that had participated in the study. Seven of the organisations that participated in the research are from Latin America and the Caribbean: The Civil Human Rights Association of United Women Migrants and Refugees in Argentina (AMUMRA) of Argentina; Renacer, Hope Foundation and Space Corporation Foundation Women of Colombia; Ecuador Hope Foundation; Street Brigade Support Women “Elisa Martínez”, A.C. of Mexico and Alternative Forms of Human and Social Capital (CHS Alternativo) of Peru.

Download the Executive Summary in English:

[http://www.gaaww.org/publications/Executive\\_Summary.Eng\\_GAATW\\_Accountabi...?](http://www.gaaww.org/publications/Executive_Summary.Eng_GAATW_Accountabi...?)

## **SEX WORKERS ORGANISING FOR CHANGE: SELF-REPRESENTATION, COMMUNITY MOBILISATION, AND WORKING CONDITIONS**

Sex worker rights organisations are creatively responding to violence, exploitation and other abuses within the sex industry, including instances of human trafficking, according to a new report published by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-representation, community mobilisation and working conditions.

The report is based on research conducted with sex worker organisations in seven countries: Canada, Mexico, Spain, South Africa, India, Thailand and New Zealand. It highlights cases where sex workers, or sex worker organisations, learnt of situations where a woman was experiencing violence, working under unacceptable conditions, or was brought to the industry through force or deception, for the purpose of exploitation. In these instances,



sex workers resolved the issue as a collective, by providing advice and referral to other organisations, negotiating with the brothel owner/madam, chasing the pimp out of their area, or gathering money to help the woman return home.

Downloads:

Complete report:

<http://www.gaatw.org/publications/SWorganising/SWorganising-complete-web.pdf>

<http://www.gaatw.org/publications/SWorganising/Mexico-web.pdf>

## **AN END TO THE SHAME: STIGMA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG MEXICAN SEX WORKERS**

MARTA LAMAS, December 9, 2016

Shedding feelings of shame relies on the politicisation of a stigmatised identity,  
and on opening up new lines of action and resistance.

### **Open Movements**

The openMovements series invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.

### **lead**

Protest against femicide. Used with permission.

Sex workers are a group that face major obstacles in terms of their political participation. One of these hurdles is the stigma that is associated with the centuries-old ostensibly female term, 'prostitution'. Another is the neo-abolitionist position which has led many people to propose the eradication of the sex trade due to its intermingling with trafficking. Both of these generate a context that produces shame for the majority of sex workers, making it difficult for them to vindicate themselves and fight for their rights.

This context is relatively recent: starting in the 1970s — hand-in-hand with the cultural changes that stimulated the feminist movement — diverse groups of sex workers in different countries began to systematically voice their desire for sex work to be considered legal. They participated in local gatherings and global meetings to confer on their working conditions, while some went on strike and others threatened to expose the identities of their clients. Progress was made on different fronts up until the end of the 1980s through unionisation, the repeal of discriminatory laws, debates on sexual freedom and the establishment of alliances with other movements and groups.

However, from the 1990s onwards, their organisational impetus was faced with a neo-abolitionist campaign driven by the moral crusades of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush who, backed by both religious groups and feminists opposing violence against women, managed to deploy a global discourse against the sex trade. Little by little, fear and unease regarding the trafficking of 'sex slaves' began to dominate the international discourse on the sex trade which resulted in the UN Protocol on trafficking,<sup>1</sup> as well as a worldwide policy of victim 'rescue'.

### **Brigada Callejera in Mexico**

In Mexico the process of sex worker organisation to demand labour rights has been permeated by these events. It was not until the mid-1980s that groups of workers rallied together to contest police raids, resulting in the appointment of 'representatives' recognised by the government of Mexico City, as well as the establishment of so-called 'tolerance zones': sites on the street where workers were allowed to 'stand' in order to attract clients. This corresponded with the first reorganisation of sex in public places which – at least at that time – offered greater safeguards.

Little by little, the socio-political capacity of certain groups of sex workers was increased, enabling them to fight for the recognition of the occupational nature of their work. In the mid-1990s, and in close liaison with a civil association called Brigada Callejera en Apoyo a la Mujer "Elisa Martínez" (Street Brigade in Support of Women "Elisa Martínez"), the foundations were laid for collective actions of reflection and debate. Brigada Callejera promotes, trains and carries out advocacy actions, working in small operative groups. Their contact with sex workers is, as their name suggests, on the streets, but they also show solidarity with women who live in situations of discrimination, such as indigenous women and migrants. This non-profit, non-partisan and secular civil association, comprising sex workers, other supportive women and a board of trustees composed of health, public policy and media experts, is now a specialist in defending the human, civil and labour rights of sex workers, as well as in the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases.

#### **How to cite:**

Lamas, M. (2016) An end to the shame: stigma and political participation among Mexican sex workers, Open Democracy / ISA RC-47: Open Movements, 9 December.

<https://opendemocracy.net/marta-lamas/end-to-shame-stigma-and-political-..>

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime is integrated by three fundamental commitments:

A protocol against the smuggling of migrants; another against the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms and the last, known as the Palermo Protocol, "to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children". It was adopted by Mexico on November 15, 2000.

## **Struggle for legitimacy**

### **Used with permission**

Since 1993 Brigada Callejera has promoted and accompanied a process of political awareness and public affirmation for sex worker identity. One of its objectives is to persuade Mexican society — specifically the working class and the state — to change its denigrating perception of this activity. Since 1997, Brigada Callejera has coordinated nineteen Encuentros Nacionales (national meetings) where relevant issues of the day have been debated; and where joint actions with other groups have been programmed, particularly those directed at obtaining dignified working conditions and respect for the human and civil rights of all people involved in sex work. Substantive political issues have been analysed and discussed in all of the Encuentros alongside the implementation of training workshops.

### **In the choice between being a ‘victim’ and a ‘whore’, many workers opt for the former**

During the first Encuentro Nacional in 1997, the importance of reclaiming work rights through unionised struggle by independent sex workers was raised. And shortly thereafter in 1999, Brigada Callejera and la Red Mexicana de Trabajo Sexual (the Mexican Network of Sex Work) agreed that the Ángeles en Busca de Libertad cooperative (Angels in Pursuit of Freedom) would petition the Mexican labour ministry to establish for sex workers the credentials that are granted to other self-employed street vendors with no fixed wages, such as shoe-shiners, mariachis, musicians, buskers, car-washers and lottery ticket vendors. Such a license would be physical evidence of the permission granted by the local government of Mexico City for sexual services to be offered in public places. Credentials present minor protection against police and judicial raids. Over the course of a decade, their request was denied on different occasions despite the insistence of Brigada Callejera and la Red Mexicana de Trabajo Sexual. At the same time, they continued to meet and debate internally on the problems and the violence that they faced, due in particular to the police and judicial extortions.

At the same time, the neo-abolitionist position was advancing, with declarations that the magnitude of trafficking was ‘immense’ and that ‘the problem was growing’. These were strategic declarations, formulated to attract media attention, finance and the interest of those responsible for creating policy. Badgered by this incendiary discourse, police across the country carried out ‘anti-trafficking’ raids on nightclubs and cabarets.

These police operations have become violent raids against sex workers, who are criminalised, incriminated and jailed for crimes that they did not commit — should they not agree to declare themselves victims of trafficking. And here again the stigma arises: in the choice between being a ‘victim’ and a ‘whore’, many workers opt for the former, fearful for their reputations and even of just appearing in the press.

Although the neo-abolitionist crusade visualises the phenomenon of the sex trade in black and white, with no recognition of the nuances and complexities of sex work, one fact however is certain: sex work continues to be an activity chosen by hundreds of thousands of women with no coercion other than their economic situations. For this reason it is necessary to understand that rather than there being a clear contrast between unforced labour and forced labour, what exists is a continuum of relative freedom and coercion.

### **Rather than there being a clear contrast between unforced labour and forced labour, what exists is a continuum of relative freedom and coercion**

Since women have different social positions and educations, sex work is in certain cases chosen because it is empowering and liberating to earn money on one’s own terms, while in other cases it is reduced to a situation of precarious survival, with overtones of guilt and shame. Many women become involved through economic despair, and others are introduced to it through drugs. But it must not be forgotten that, aside from these appalling situations, there are also women who make a pragmatic assessment of the labour market and use the strategy of selling sexual services for social mobility, to become independent, and even to pay for a university education or get a business going. In other words, while there is the problem of abhorrent and criminal trafficking, with women being kidnapped or deceived, there is also a sex trade which women enter and leave freely, with some of them making money, helping family members and even getting married. For this reason, those women who maintain that it is a job with economic advantages are correct, but not in all cases, and those who insist that prostitution is violence against women are also correct, but not in all cases.

The trafficking of human beings undeniably exists and is a dreadful criminal scourge, of which sexual exploitation is just a part. But the discursive manipulation of neo-abolitionism distorts the sex trade phenomenon, throws up a smoke screen on the structural conditions that force poor women into the sex trade, and endorses puritanical positions on sex.

## **The arrival of regulation**

As a result of this problematic situation, workers of the Red Mexicana de Trabajo Sexual and Brigada Callejera in their internal discussions have uncovered the link between governmental extortion practices and the lack of the recognition of their labour rights on the one hand, and the persistence of stigma on the other. It was neither fast nor easy, but the emphasis given to internal debate led to the strengthening of the political community of sex workers.

Insisting on the importance of acknowledging their work status, 100 members of the Red Mexicana de Trabajo Sexual once again requested credentials in August 2012. In the absence of a positive response, they decided to take the matter to court. Following a remarkable consensus in the debate between workers a collective decision was made: a professional would represent them in court. A lawyer with similar political views filed an amparo (constitutional relief) action for the violation of the right to work in peace as non-wage sex workers and, specifically, for the violation of the right to claim credentials.

## **A meeting of sex workers at Brigada Callejera**

Image: Esquerra Anticapitalista/Raúl Zibechi. Some rights reserved.

Their endeavours were underpinned by their experiences of struggle and shared vision regarding the transformation of the structural conditions of their work. Nevertheless, in daily politics, one has to mediate. Regulation was the lesser evil to provide sex workers with health, education and training opportunities to accompany workers' rights. This signifies their recognition as non-wage workers, with licenses allowing them to open bank accounts or request loans on declaring their sources of income. The credentials are also a form of protection against 'anti-trafficking' police raids.

Sex workers in Mexico are trapped in a legal limbo: individual prostitution by adults is not prohibited but also not regulated, and consequently some forms of work organisation (in apartments or clubs) can be considered to be 'sexual exploitation' or pandering. In view of this discriminatory situation, sex worker activists moved to take on a specific political stance: to present themselves as workers and claim the recognition of their rights as such. This meant not just assuming the stigmatised identity of a sex worker, but also taking legal action against the government. The decision to take this issue to court was the right one and a turning point in the process.

Clearly, the socio-cultural context sex workers face is very important — and complex. Puritanism rejects commercial sex and associates it with immorality, while the street

worker personality conjures up a cocktail of fear and anxiety (infections, crime, etc.). With regard to the former, sex work subverts the traditional model of femininity. It provokes adverse reactions because it infringes upon the cultural ideal of chastity and feminine modesty. The underlying issue is precisely the existence of a double moral standard: women's sexuality is assessed differently to men's. The division that is established between 'decent' women and 'whores' reinforces social expectations with respect to feminine sexuality: women must only have sex within a loving relationship. 'Whore' is a negative epithet assigned to women who defy received cultural ideals of femininity, and includes women who have casual or recreational sex, although at no charge.

Because of the stigma of 'whore' the majority of sex workers refuse to publicly speak up for their rights. This stigma produces shame and many sex workers apply it to themselves through the mechanism of symbolic violence, an 'invisible' form of domination. This 'shame' is an obstacle to their political participation.

Workers who have already obtained their licenses are a clear example of agency powered by organisation and political work. Their attainment of such licenses marks the beginning of a policy of rights and recognition — which awards them public and legal identity in society, and above all, in their own eyes. Since the stigma of 'whore' generates shame, sex workers use pseudonyms and many of them lead double lives; only a few can openly reveal their work within their immediate families. In spite of this, the fear that surrounds them is considerable. It is one thing for relatives and close friends to accept their work but quite another for a family woman to openly defend her rights, letting many see that she is a whore. For this reason, the weight of the stigma has also functioned as an obstacle to the political organisation of sex workers.

## **Sex work subverts the traditional model of femininity**

### **Whores versus 'decent' women**

In the case of sex workers, the shame is due to the division between whores and decent women (madonas). Therefore, when journalists try to photograph them they hide their faces and in their presentations they traditionally use masks. As a result, the media was taken aback when they appeared with faces uncovered as they received their non-wage workers credentials. Reporters were astounded that the sex workers allowed themselves to be photographed and interviewed, and that they showed their faces "without a sense of shame". Shame, however, was absent.

This is the result of the political work that Brigada Callejera has carried out, which not only vindicates the political positioning of sex work but has also set in motion a large-scale intervention that has raised awareness of the political without neglecting the personal. Their model proposes central political discussions but also encourages the women to share their personal experiences: “these are my wounds, this is my life.” If workers got together only to tell each other how much they suffered or how bad things were, there would be no political impact. Comrades at Brigada Callejera want sex workers to learn to think, and understand how stigma is created and how social injustice functions. To provoke and fuel workers’ resistance, they tell them: take the floor. Speak. But reflect as well. Think. Write. And Brigada Callejera, by way of the Aquiles Baeza journalism workshop — where they can tell their personal stories — offers them both the conceptual tools to think in new ways, and the means and space in which to do it.

### **Red crosses displayed in protest against femicide in Mexico. Used with permission**

Apart from the process of deconstructing the symbolic violence, Brigada Callejera proposes that they meet with others who share common experiences. Bonding with others becomes an instrument of public affectivity. It is also illuminating to situate many problems in the power relations of macro-structural conditions, and for this it is necessary to go beyond personal experience and to understand that experience always resonates with those of others. This is the way to avoid guilt and reach a different level of reflection and commitment.

This combination of self-esteem, support, politicisation, learning and showing affection has a trigger — commitment, a radical and absolute commitment from Brigada Callejera which is in turn reciprocated by the workers. This process was assisted by the Zapatistas: participating in the ELZN’s Otra Campaña, sex workers went to indigenous communities and to poor neighbourhoods to listen to the injustice, discrimination and dispossession experienced by many others.

### **A critical perspective**

Shedding feelings of shame relies on building political awareness and establishing a training process which, through the politicisation of a stigmatised identity, opens up new lines of action and resistance. Accordingly, a new critical perspective regarding trafficking that underlines the many other forms of non-sexual forced labour, such as farm work, domestic work and maquila, was developed. Additionally, sex workers point out that the most efficient public policy intervention in relation to the prevention of workplace violence is not the prohibition, but rather a transformation of the structural conditions that lead people to pursue such lines of work.



The critical perspective of Brigada Callejera redirected the outlook of sex workers towards neoliberalism and the way it functions, and drew attention to the workers' rights which can allow them to work independently, away from the mafia. The regulation of sex work, as the means of survival of thousands of impoverished women, discourages macho abuse in all its forms — by clients, the police, officials, and even their partners. That is why their labour must not be conflated with trafficking.

## **CIVIL ASSOCIATIONS URGE TO WATCH OVER THE FREE SEX ENTERPRISE**

Posted by admin in La Casa de Jardín

MEXICO CITY, March 16 -. More than 70 percent of female victims of sexual exploitation in Mexico City at their release from traffickers returns to the world of prostitution due to the lack of job opportunities, therapeutic support and social stigma.

77 percent of 15 thousand sex workers that have turned to the Street Brigade Support organization Women Elisa Martínez, AC for 15 years that they claimed to be survivors of trafficking, continue in sex work “not because they like prostitution, not because they feel victimized, but because there are no other labor choices, for all women and men in this army of the sex trade. ”

Jaime Montejó, spokesman and founder of Street Brigade organization maintains that the authorities and the city's society “all women who engage in prostitution are victims” and they focus operations on victimizing prostitution without generating long-term options after their bailouts.

The organization has 22 years of life, it trusts in the work made by the Central Office of Research for the Care of the Crime of Trafficking in Persons of the Attorney General of Justice of the Federal District (PGJDF), but believes that the solution to eradicating sexual exploitation is not through lockouts, but with the regularization and acceptance.

Last week, in a historic event, 14 sex workers won an injunction through the first district judge in administrative matters, Paula María García Villegas, because the GDF recognizes them as self-employed workers after 20 years of legal proceedings.

With this resolution, Mexico City could be the first institution in the country to offer options to organize a first union; cooperatives to avoid the assigning of leaders that allow the trafficking of women and presence of pimps.

What the judge says is that there are those who are forced into prostitution, and must be rescued, but there's willing prostitution, and those who decide to continue in prostitution, the GDF must guarantee their rights so that they are not extorted, don't suffer police abuse, and are not forced to testify against strangers.

"The Secretary of Labor, Patricia Mercado, is offering opportunities to be reviewed for those who want to learn a different profession, with no obligations," Montejo said in an interview. She warned that this model will work if you allow the process to be personal.

"If in this new rearrangement control of these documents is re-put in the hands of few, trafficking and pimping will be refounded, and a comprehensive law against trafficking will serve for nothing. Right now, it works for that when it's massive, it's known who has no birth certificate, who does not have IFE, who is a minor, and whether adult women without documents are likely to be reported missing in other states," she said .

Street Brigade suggested that the Human Rights Commission of the Federal District (CDHDF) is present in the operations, because some women are in the sex industry by choice and they can't all be characterized as victims.

He said that the closure of the tables in Cuajimalpa is only causing greater hiding in homes and communal areas.

This is a translation. Source:

<http://www.excelsior.com.mx/comunidad/2014/03/16/948931>



## **MEXICO'S STREET BRIGADE: SEX, REVOLUTION, AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

December 18, 2007 Raúl Zibechi Mexico

The alliance between Zapatistas, sex workers, and transvestites shows the power of social change in a key cultural way—when it's anchored to daily life. In Mexico, one of the strongest and most overbearing enclaves of patriarchy and machismo, Subcomandante Marcos has opened the doors to debate about discrimination in a controversial area.

What purpose is there, in classic revolutionary logic, in covering thousands of kilometers to meet with a handful of whores and crossdressers? What can such alliances offer to strengthen the “accumulation of power,” any professional politicians' central task? It seems obvious, from a cost-benefit analysis, that this type of effort should be useless. However, Subcomandante Marcos has been committed to this kind of meeting since January of last year under the auspices of The Other Campaign (La Otra Campaña), with the understanding that it means looking for new ways of doing politics. It passes through places that are far from the madding crowd and takes place with actors who, like indigenous people, understand social change as an affirmation of difference.

### **A QUESTION OF CHARM**

The sale of condoms is the main source of financing for the diverse projects of the Mexican Sex Work Network. Choosing the type of condom alongside design and name becomes a form of claiming ownership of the instrument of work and protection, and was left up to the ideas of prostitutes and transvestites.

“When we began the AIDS-protection program,” remembers Elvira, “we realized that price was one of the main problems. For older ladies, to spend 25 pesos on a condom was to invest almost everything they had charged the client.” Firstly they looked for donations from the State, which through CENSIDA, the organization dedicated to the fight against AIDS, donated them 60,000 condoms a month. “But when we began to report cases of corruption they reduced that to 3,600 condoms.”

They began to visit various distributors and factories and found that, in exact opposite to what market laws should indicate, buying in bulk raised the prices. They got in contact with a manufacturer who agreed to sell to them at the same price as to pharmacies and other distributors. “We nearly fell over in shock. He sold us condoms at 75 cents (about US\$.07) each but in the pharmacies they're 12 pesos (\$1), that is 15 times the price of the cost,” Elvira says.

The Network began to distribute condoms at the price of one peso each, and with that profit they managed to subsidize almost all the projects, but particularly the clinics that consumed the bulk of their resources. "Before putting them on sale we spoke to the compañeras, we did workshops to see what they wanted, because some condoms smelled very bad or irritated because they contained harmful substances. They themselves suggested the name "El Encanto" (The Charm) to the three-month long debate process in which hundreds of sex workers chose between 20 brands." The brand had to be attractive for both the client and for themselves. Currently, they sell three million a year.

But the transvestites decided not to use the chosen condom because it wasn't suited to their needs. "They said it's very thin and they were right, because it was designed for vaginal use and it would break when they used it." They found a stronger and more lubricated condom and started the same debate as the women had had. In the end they decided to print the rainbow of sexual diversity on it, and a pink triangle. "They chose the name Triángulo (Triangle) because that's the symbol with which the Nazis stigmatized homosexuals, so in that way they adopted it as a tribute," says Elvira.

They failed with the female condom. A few years ago they began to import it from England until a multinational company realized that the Mexican market was growing and withdrew the Network's permission to distribute. In effect, the market is very monopolized. "While in the world there are 67 condom factories, there's just one for female condoms. We have to wait for there to be more competition," says Elvira, with irony.

Subcomandante Marcos is El Encanto's most famous supporter. In Mexico there is a long history of "condom fairs." In November 2005 the 50th National Condom Festival was celebrated in Mexico City's central plaza and in various states local annual fairs are held to raise money for organizations linked to sex work. Recently the first "virtual condom store" made its debut on: <http://brigadaac.mayfirst.org/condoneras-educativas-el-encanto-del-condon>

Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer (Women's Supportive Street Brigade) is a Mexican collective that has managed, in the last 15 years, to weave a wide net of social work with prostitutes and transvestites, called the Mexican Sex Work Network. This has meant transcending the "victim" role and becoming people who want to be recognized as workers by their peers, not seen as beings who have "fallen" into the world's oldest profession through ignorance, poverty, or submission. A quick look at what they have tackled so far reveals a deep work of emancipation.

## Education, Clinics, and Condoms

A differentiating characteristic of the Network is that its members don't want to depend on the State, although they are constantly criticizing it. Street Brigade began its work 15 years ago, its base a group of sociology graduates from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The small initial nucleus—Elvira Madrid, Jaime Montejó, and Rosa Icela—began to weave a net that now reaches 28 of Mexico's 32 states. Over time they chose to work in a horizontal form, but not for ideological reasons. "The government co-opted many state coordinations, a habitual practice in the political culture of this country, so we saw that the best way to work is horizontally, in an assembly style, and trying not to have representatives," Elvira points out.

The Network encouraged women to form cooperatives to avoid dependence and to make themselves the bosses of their sources of employment. They rented hotels and shared the profits among the members. The first were the transvestites who formed the cooperative Angeles en Busca de Libertad (Angels Searching for Freedom).

"The cooperative hotels exist in various states but some of them failed because the members would end up replicating the same behavioral patterns as the ones they were organizing against," Rosa comments.

But the star project, the one most valued by the workers, are the clinics. Two clinics already exist in Mexico City and are self-managed and free of charge. They were born from the corruption and discrimination of the state organisms that only provided them with services through bribery. Moreover, Elvira indicates, "Getting tested scared them because it could mean loss of income, given that when a girl has AIDS there are state governments that will put her photo up in hotels so that they don't give her a room." On the contrary, in the Network clinics tests are voluntary and confidential, emphasizing education. "The majority of sex workers are illiterate and many are indigenous. For this reason we dedicate most of our efforts to education, to the point that most of the participants in the Network are health promoters and educate their peers, which is much more effective."

The clinics, one of them situated in the center of the city right in the "red light district" offer colposcopies and pap smears and also electrosurgery because, as Rosa says, "in Mexico papiloma viruses (HPV) cause more deaths than HIV." While inefficient public hospitals have two-month waiting lists for being seen and one year waiting lists for surgery, the Network clinics' results are ready in just a week.

The prostitutes and the transvestites seem enthusiastic about “their” clinic, where they often bring their partners, and where some even drag their clients. “The main part of our work is respect. We don’t ask why they got infected, rather we concentrate on educating them so it doesn’t happen to them again, so they aren’t just patients any more, so they begin to be active participants in their health care,” Elvira says. The project is rounded off with a food program for people with limited resources or who for some reason can’t work, a school assistance program for the kids, and another to help mothers finish school.

The Network’s projects are financed by “social condom marketing.” Condoms are sold at different prices depending on the ability and responsibility of the buyer, and represent 85% of the Network’s income. No one is salaried and the only people who are paid for their work are the doctors. “We don’t agree with sex work, but it exists and will continue to exist, and in the meantime we have to do something. We were an abolitionist group but later we saw that it wasn’t about saving anybody, but really about working together,” Jaime intervenes. For those who are looking for alternatives to sex work, there are productive projects, the most outstanding of which are handicrafts, production and sale of clothing, and condom stores. Although some projects have turned out to be unviable, as families collaborated they managed to keep two-thirds of the attempts open.

## **Survival in the Jungle**

In 2004, the members of the Street Brigade came into contact with the Health Collective for Everyone (Colectivo de Salud para Todos y Todas), university students who coordinate health projects in the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas. For two years they worked with a group of health promoters in the communities, indigenous people chosen by their neighbors to specialize in sanitary assistance. “One of the first challenges was breaking the fear of supposed cultural resistances about the subject of contraception, sexual and reproductive rights, and sexually transmitted diseases,” they relate.

During these consultations and workshops they chose the themes that would later resurface in the elaboration of a long and densely-named manual: The Other Campaign of Sexual and Reproductive Health for the Indigenous and Peasant Resistance in Mexico. Over 270 pages, this text, full of detailed illustrations designed for work with indigenous women, covers the usual issues like anatomy and physiology of the reproductive organs, use of contraceptives, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other illnesses. They also speak of abortion, although the catechists condemn it. “Samuel Ruiz, a man who is very close to the indigenous people, toured the communities when the Zapatistas decriminalized abortion, saying that it’s a crime,” Jaime remembers.

But there are sections imbued with diverse currents of alternative health. One of these concentrates on “women’s bodily autonomy,” which covers education on how to avoid illnesses, choosing how many children to have, and how to enjoy one’s sexuality (almost a taboo among indigenous people). Bodily autonomy supposes, according to this manual, the exploration of the senses, connection with language to do with the body, and the different reactions of the body in extreme situations. Collective and self-massages link this to a holistic conception of health and curing.

The development of this manual meant overcoming more than a few obstacles. In regards to family planning, three strikingly different community experiences emerged: repressive and authoritarian government schemes, the religious ban on contraception, and “the guerilla wish to populate the earth with little guerilla sons.” From three different angles, these three policies overlooked women’s wishes. The manual is used by hundreds of educators working in tens of Zapatista-constructed clinics, in over a decade, in the thousand supporting communities.

#### **NATIONAL SEX WORK DAY: BATTLING SEXIST VIOLENCE**

Crime and aggression against sex workers are everyday occurrences. On July 11, 2006 a group of soldiers raped 14 dancers in Castaños, Coahuila—the perpetrators remain unpunished. In the La Merced area of Mexico City, in just 15 days last July four sex workers were murdered. At the commemoration of the first anniversary of the Castaños rape incident, the Mexican Sex Work Network began to celebrate the National Day of Sex Work as a way of drawing attention to the violence and discrimination that prostitutes and transvestites suffer. A Network report manifests its rejection of the “tolerance zones” imposed in various cities, as they are “a system of control that legitimates sexual, economic, and psychological exploitation of minors and adults who are linked to commercial sex.” However, the Network maintains that after seven years of monitoring, it found that among the main crimes against sex workers are forced disappearances and the kidnappings and sexual exploitation of their children.

As opposed to what the sociologists thought at the beginning of their work, say Elvira and Rosa, the women of the Lacandon jungle communities were eager about contraceptives. And little by little they open up about other things. “We work in the promotion of sexual and reproductive health as a practice of liberty and not as an imposition or a prohibition. For this reason we also live out the principle of respect for people who are gay,



lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. It's not easy, but we're starting to see male couples walk hand-in-hand through their communities. Or women making the decision to divorce when before Zapatismo it had been the parents who found them marriage partners. This is social change, and what a change."

### **Can Transvestites Change the World?**

Can indigenous people? Half a century ago, one of the founders of so-called "scientific socialism," wrote that the proletariat could change the world because they had nothing to lose "but their chains." Today, the heirs of those proletariats are rebellious at the hour of losing privileges like steady work and retirement, they refuse to pay taxes, and they strike to avoid being charged the tax on their income.

Marcos himself hints at this in his epilogue to the manual, laying bare how the alliance between health and sex is one of the strongest nuclei of social control. "Capitalism converts health into a market good, and health administrators, doctors, nurses, and all the apparatus of hospitalization or health distribution are also turned in to a type of foreman of this business, turning the patient into a de facto client, from whom the object is to get as much money as possible from without necessarily giving more health back in return." It seems to be no coincidence that, along their dependency-breaking road, the Zapatistas have run up against the area of prostitute health and organized transvestites, groups that have been forced to take control of healthcare into their own hands. Seen in this light, some people belong in the "disposable" category, barely even having chains, material or symbolic, to lose.

Translated for the Americas Program by Nalina Eggert.

Raúl Zibechi is an international analyst for Brecha, a weekly journal in Montevideo, Uruguay, professor and researcher on social movements at the Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina, and adviser to social groups. He is a monthly contributor to the CIP Americas Program ([www.americaspolicy.org](http://www.americaspolicy.org)).



## **RIGHTS AND RISKS: MEXICO CITY ORGANIZATION PROMOTES DIGNITY, OFFERS SERVICES FOR SEX WORKERS**

Mayela Sánchez. Senior Reporter

Brigada Callejera, created in 1995 by former sociology students, offers a health clinic, literacy training, psychological support and more. There are even comic books that describe human trafficking law and other issues.

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO — Some 50 sex workers fill up the office of Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer “Elisa Martínez,” an activist group that promotes the rights of sex workers, including transgender people, and also battles trafficking and focuses on HIV and AIDS prevention. It is March 8, and the sex workers are gathered for a celebration for International Women’s Day.

Before the celebration, the president of the organization, Elvira Madrid Romero, chats with the group. Despite her short stature and serene voice, Madrid Romero, 49, asserts herself, and the women listen to her attentively.

The organization, commonly called Brigada Callejera, is in La Merced, a Mexico City neighborhood considered to be one of the main centers for sex work in the country’s capital.

Madrid Romero was born in Mexico City, and she’s always lived here. She first connected with sex workers in 1989, when she was a sociology student at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the national university in Mexico City, and was chosen by her teacher to assist in research on the sociology of prostitution.

While she was doing that research, Madrid Romero says, she observed that no one helped the sex workers when they got sick, or even when they were at the point of dying. That affected her and convinced her to dedicate her life to this work.

“You cannot remain arms crossed,” she says.

Brigada Callejera was officially formed in 1995 by four former sociology students. They added “Elisa Martínez” to the organization name in memory of a sex worker whom they’d met during their work as students, and who had died of AIDS.

Three of those former students still work there: Madrid Romero; her husband, Jaime Montejo; and her sister, Rosa Icela Madrid Romero.

Montejo, now the organization's press coordinator, says group members chose Elvira Madrid Romero as president because they considered her the most fearless and the most empathetic to the sex workers.

Now, nearly three decades after she first began supporting sex workers, Madrid Romero has developed a toolbox of strategies that she says are effective in combating the discrimination and violence they regularly face.

The Brigada Callejera office includes a health clinic, where sex workers have access to pregnancy tests, HIV tests and other medical exams. Some of those services are free, and others are offered at a low cost that covers supplies. Condoms and lubricants are sold below cost.

Brigada Callejera also offers other services, including acupuncture and literacy and psychological support.

But the real work is in the streets, she says.

"On the street is the struggle, that's why we call ourselves Brigada Callejera," she says. "This is a space where [the sex workers] know that if they need to talk with anyone, go to the doctor, to the dentist, literacy, well here it is. But our work is on the street".

In English, Brigada Callejera means "Street Brigade".

Gloria Muñoz Ramírez, a journalist and member of Brigada Callejera's board, says Madrid Romero's primary contribution has been to give dignity to sex workers instead of trying to convince them to leave the sex trade.

*"I knew the Mexico of before. There were many raids, it was of paying the police. Imagine, like 15 years fighting with all of that [just] for Brigada Callejera to come after. It was a lot of help, a lot of support, a lot of teaching, a lot that we learned from Brigada Callejera, that truthfully, so far we continue learning more each time".*

Chabelita, a 57-year-old sex worker who asked to be identified by her alias.

Brigada Callejera uses innovative methods to get sex workers the services and information they need. The group distributes comic books that describe the rights of sex workers and the risks of their trade. A network of sex workers, maintained by Brigada Callejera, helps others find the health care they need and even offers accompaniment to doctors' appointments.

"Many of the sex workers have been trampled on, many are very alone women, very vulnerable, who have suffered an excess of violence," Muñoz Ramírez says. "For a sex worker, it's really important to rely on someone, and they count on Elvira."

In Mexico City, prostitution is considered a violation of the law, according to a 2014 reform to the 2004 Mexico City law regulating civic culture. The violation is punishable by a fine, which in 2016 ranges from approximately 715 to 2,870 Mexican pesos (\$42 to \$167), or by an arrest lasting 13 to 24 hours.

In 2014, a court judge found this precept to be unconstitutional, noting that it is contrary to the right to work.

But that finding isn't widely applied, says Claudia Torres Patiño, who between 2011 and 2015 researched sex work and human trafficking from the legal perspective at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, a public research center in social sciences.

She is currently researching the effects of this court finding, she said in a Skype audio interview from the United States, where she is pursuing a master's degree at Harvard Law School.

The total number of sex workers in Mexico City is unclear.

The 2014 resolution has generated data on the issue since the local Secretaría de Trabajo y Fomento al Empleo, Mexico City's labor and employment promotion ministry, was ordered to give credentials to sex workers that recognize them as self-employed.

Between the start of 2014 and last January, the ministry provided 170 credentials, Torres Patiño says, referring to data she requested from the government.

According to Brigada Callejera's registry, Madrid Romero says, 5,040 workers sought medical consultation from the organization last year.

For Madrid Romero, aiding sex workers means more than just speaking with them on the street. It means tracking down workers who have been arrested, or visiting them in the hospital. It means helping them at health clinics, coming to the aid of their children or even organizing funerals when someone dies.

A 30-year-old sex worker, who asked that her name not be published, says she learned about Brigada Callejera four years ago because Madrid Romero and other Brigada Callejera members showed up in an area frequented by sex workers.

That's how she learned about sexually transmitted infections and contraception, she says. She also learned about the services offered by Brigada Callejera. She says she's received medicine, contraceptives and advice.

"I didn't used to know, but, since I began to come here, I learned everything," she says.

Sex workers have long faced abuse. In 1994, the Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, the human rights commission for Mexico City, stated that abuse, extortion and illegal detention of sex workers and their clients by police, civic judges and public servants were common in La Merced and other areas.

Chabelita, a 57-year-old sex worker who uses this single name, has been in the sex trade for more than 40 years, she says. The era referenced in that 1994 report brought suffering, she says.

"I knew the Mexico of before. There were many raids, it was of paying the police," says Chabelita. "Imagine, like 15 years fighting with all of that [just] for Brigada Callejera to come after. It was a lot of help, a lot of support, a lot of teaching, a lot that we learned from Brigada Callejera, that truthfully, so far we continue learning more each time."

To spread awareness about sex workers' rights and risks, Brigada Callejera publishes and distribute comic books, designed to mirror popular comic strips that showcase voluptuous women and erotic scenes.

Sex workers often read those sorts of comic strips, Madrid Romero says, so the book is an effective way to communicate a message to sex workers, including those who are illiterate or who are being watched by pimps.

One of the comics is an adaptation of an academic text by Torres Patiño about the law against human trafficking.

"I realized that it was a very good way to get information to the workers, and I wish there were more initiatives like these because, for example, my job is a job where if you don't adapt, [the sex workers] don't read, they don't get informed," the law student says. "I don't think I would have ever been able to get my information to the workers if it hadn't been for [Brigada Callejera.]"

The comics have been published for about 15 years, Madrid Romero says.

At the end of the International Women's Day celebration, the sex workers say goodbye to Madrid Romero with hugs. All of them took bags with gifts that Brigada Callejera gave them, including toys for their children and kitchen utensils.

"These events are precisely that, like to give us strength of knowing that they will always be there for us, that they will always support us, that they will always honor us those days that went by unnoticed by us," Chabelita says. "This work of theirs, I feel that for us it is very great, because who gives you something for nothing?"

Rishi Khalsa, GPJ, translated this article from Spanish.



## **ELVIRA THE RADICAL FEMINIST ON THE STREETS, ELVIRA THE ZAPATISTA, THE COMPANION OF SEX WORKERS**

### **ELVIRA, THE STREET BRIGADE AND THE SEX-WORK NETWORK**

September 2, 2013.

by Gloria Muñoz Ramírez.



"Getting to La Merced was a shocking stroke of reality. I watched as the council vans arrived from Cuauhtemoc with a lawyer who signalled who had not paid the bribes. I saw them harass, beat up and rape the girls".

Mexico City. Working on the streets is not for everyone. The rawness of the corners and the darkest places would make anyone run away. Exploitation, beatings, drug dealing, excess alcohol, people trafficking, all the underground in your face, but not everyone wants to see or feel it, even less to do something to change things.

### **Elvira Madrid Romero is one of those few people who came to La Merced to stay**

Elvira carteles Her activism for over 20 years against human trafficking and protection of human and labor rights of sex workers, has earned her many enemies. Complaints against government corruption, police violence and symbolic violence towards workers, not even mentioned by professionals seeking the abolition of prostitution, "earned her vilification and slander from those who have lived for decades off 'defending the cause of sex workers' and ignoring the people trafficking industry", said Jaime Montejó, her life partner, bodyguard, activist and member of the Street Brigade, an organization that for two decades has been installed on the streets of La Merced to accompany, defend and denounce .



Elvira came to La Merced via a research university course in sociology taught by Francisco Gomez Jara, who wrote a book on the sociology of prostitution. "Getting to La Merced was a shocking stroke of reality. I watched as the council vans arrived from Cuauhtemoc with a lawyer who signalled who had not paid the bribes. I saw them harrass, beat and rape the girls ... I also saw that the 'madrotas' (female pimp and prostitute managers) were in collusion with the authorities. And then I asked the teacher what we would do to change this situation. He said nothing, he only cooperated with the sociological investigation and he was not supposed to do anything. I said, ah, what a bastard, well then how can sociology make any changes?"

Back then Elvira had three jobs and was studying at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the UNAM. The seventh of eight children from a proletarian home, she was 20 years old and decided to spend two hours a day working on the streets, to advise on human rights, HIV AIDS, and anything else that came up" but two hours was like nothing. "So she spent two years until the course ended. elvira-taller-wirra-

With Jaime Montejo, Rosa Isela and Rodriguez Guillermo, Elvira set up the collective "we had no name, just went out to visit the girls, to walk the streets. When we got to La Merced and saw that the police picking up sex workers, the authorities extorting and making fun of them, that gave us a lot of courage, helplessness and desire to do things. We felt that we had to do something, but we were afraid".

"We began with the work of making complaints to the Attorney General and then to the National Human Rights Commission because the authorities did nothing to solve the problems. What did begin to work were the complaints to the media", relates this petite woman with her candid smile that can turn into a rage at any hint of injustice, as Merida, one of many sex workers who find refuge, support and solidarity with the Street Brigade, explained to us.

It's a world where trust is earned by actions, because the sex workers always have those trying to take advantage, Elvira recounts: "When we went into the middle of the police to not let them take the girls, we earned respect. The madrotas didnt let them to talk with us, they brought out ice picks to intimidate us, and we said, -Do as you like, we know how to defend ourselves and you can't scare us-. It was there we won the respect and confidence of all ".

Elvira Madrid, radical feminist on the streets... not in the classroom or in the forums, Zapatista supporter since 1994, is impossible to shut up. She explains better than anyone how the 'madrotas' work, taking over the streets and controlling the sex-workers: "The madrotas are chosen by the authorities. They arm them to extort, intimidate, to beat up and kill. This I know," she says, confident as ever.

– And how do they recruit their workers?

– They use their own sons to either trap young women into falling in love, or they steal or buy them. It's the sons who have the direct control over the workers who must always do what they want. First they weave emotional threads, then get them pregnant and take away the children as a way to stop them fleeing, then give them money, and keep them always submissive.

The role of the 'madrotas', Elvira explains, is to control the streets, "it's they who say who decide who stays in the street and who can not. Those who disobey disappear, get beaten or killed. They put out the word to prevent them getting into other work elsewhere". She says.

– In this context of violence, do you have many enemies?

– Yes, first of all the authorities, who are those at the top and not seen so easily. Then the intermediates, who are the madrotas, and then the pimps, who are direct.

Elvira has been threatened by all these sectors. "The madrotas constantly following us not to talk to the girls. On many occasions I have been stopped, telling me I can not go out there, I have been threatened with knives, razors, scissors, ice picks".

An example: "When we find they have an under age prostitute and register a complaint, the pimp tells us, -You'll die, I'll order you to be killed-. We say, so come and get us, here we are".

– How can you survive in this environment?

– How do you live. Its difficult. Too much stress sneaking around taking care of all those people, so nothing happens to the person you are supporting. That is the strongest commitment. When we get into an issue we can't leave until we finished, it is the life of

the person that is at stake, it's a commitment that you cannot stop halfway, or say I'm tired, I'm sick, because it is the life of the girls.

– And the fear?

–No, I have no fear. Threats make me stronger and give me courage. Cowardice is doing nothing. It is not about doing research, but being where we need to be.

When they are asked Elvira and all members of the Street Brigade defend the existence of voluntary sex work, where there are neither victims or victimizers. This definition does not exclude the existence of trafficking operations which they strongly denounce. "On the streets you realize who is there by choice and who is forced to be there".

## **The birth of the Street Brigade**

The Brigade members decided in 1995 that "after three years working as a collective, without a name or legal backing, to establish ourselves legally to have our own space to work with sex workers, covering their felt needs, and not ours. From this arises the health program, because the Gregorio Salas hospital refused to attend to the women, after some of them sued Dr. Zavala, director of the comprehensive care program for women, for extortion and abuse of authority".

At that point, the hospital refused entry to the girls who made the complaint. And from this event was born the first health program of the Street Brigade, doing HIV testing, pap smears and general inquiries.

Then comes the demand for condoms. In 1995, sex workers were selling health sector condoms for an incredible 25 pesos each. when they should have given them free. "The workers then asked us to make our own brand. No idea how. We thought we needed a lot of money and we had no idea how to start. We visited commercial companies to see how much it would cost. We started looking at factories and found Jorge Mena, of Profilatex, who advised us and opened the way. He came to La Merced, knew our work and was impressed, convinced that he had to do something".

Later it was our same association who named the new condom with the name El Encanto (Charm or The Charmer), and put a wrap with black and red colors, "the colours of social

struggle, but also red for love and black for elegance, plus the triangle symbol of the fight against AIDS”.

So while the health sector withdrew the support of free condoms and resold them in the sexual workplace, the Street Brigade made its own brand and distributed for one peso each until 2011, when the price went up to up to 1,20 pesos, so that “all the time women were protected and retaking control of their health”.

– What is it you are most proud of in these 20 years?

–Contact with working women. They have taught me to look at sexuality from another point of view, and to see the office being well organised, first, with many clients, we already have dentists, psychologists, acupuncture, literacy. And, most importantly, working personnel and employees come from many states of the republic, and they themselves are our calling card .

Jaime Montejó says: “Compare Elvira Madrid with women leaders who have made money by charging stratospheric fees to sex workers, ... or ex-pimps who discovered a large vein of gold in the ‘rescue of victims of trafficking’, nothing but another act of repression orchestrated by the government. However, despite the constant threats of death... Elvira’s work continues, precautions are taken and life follows its course”.





## National Sex Work Day:

Battling Sexist Violence Crime and aggression against sex workers are everyday occurrences. On July 11, 2006 a group of soldiers raped 14 dancers in Castaños, Coahuila—the perpetrators remain unpunished. In the La Merced area of Mexico City, in just 15 days last July four sex workers were murdered. At the commemoration of the first anniversary of the Castaños rape incident, the Mexican Sex Work Network began to celebrate the National Day of Sex Work as a way of drawing attention to the violence and discrimination that prostitutes and transvestites suffer. A Network report manifests its rejection of the "tolerance zones" imposed in various cities, as they are "a system of control that legitimates sexual, economic, and psychological exploitation of minors and adults who are linked to commercial sex." However, the Network maintains that after seven years of monitoring, it found that among the main crimes against sex workers are forced disappearances and the kidnappings and sexual exploitation of their children.

(Raúl Zibechi)





## WHAT VALUES MOTIVATE YOU?

**We are motivated by Faith** in the greatness of women and transvestites linked to the commercial sex trade: in their faces are reflected the beauty of creation, their great hearts and their desire to triumph in the face of adversity.

**We are accompanied by Hope**, that certainty that we can change the current situation of sexual exploitation and homophobia, and to open a horizon of possibilities such as free choice in sex, non-violence towards women and the different, and a free and voluntary maternity.

**We are inspired by Charity**, that habit of giving voice to those who have been denied it, to harbor pilgrims, to give refuge to the persecuted, to heal the sick, to satisfy those facing hunger and thirst, to understand those who are not like us, and not to judge those who work in the commercial sex trade.

**We are motivated by Solidarity**, by struggling together with the most unprotected, to obtain what is theirs and what they need to live a dignified life; what is theirs just because they are people.

**We are illuminated by Love** for those who live inhuman situations, like having to sell their own body in order not to die of hunger, and to survive in a society that condemns, denies and at the same time reproduces the offer of commercial sex.

**We are mobilized by a search for Justice**: full respect for people's rights, regardless of their social condition.